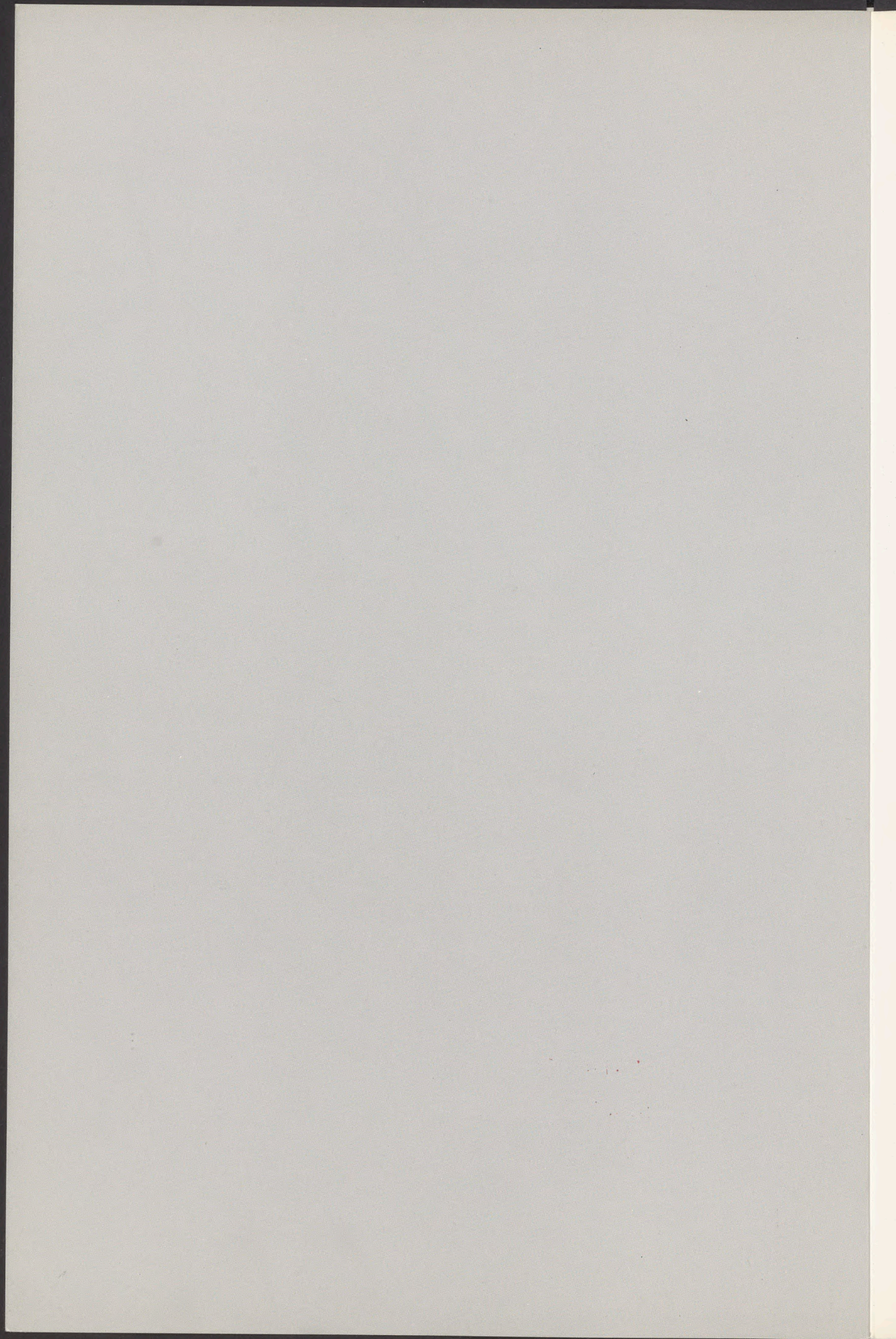


# JOHN ROBINSON

A  
RETROSPECTIVE

Do Not  
Remove

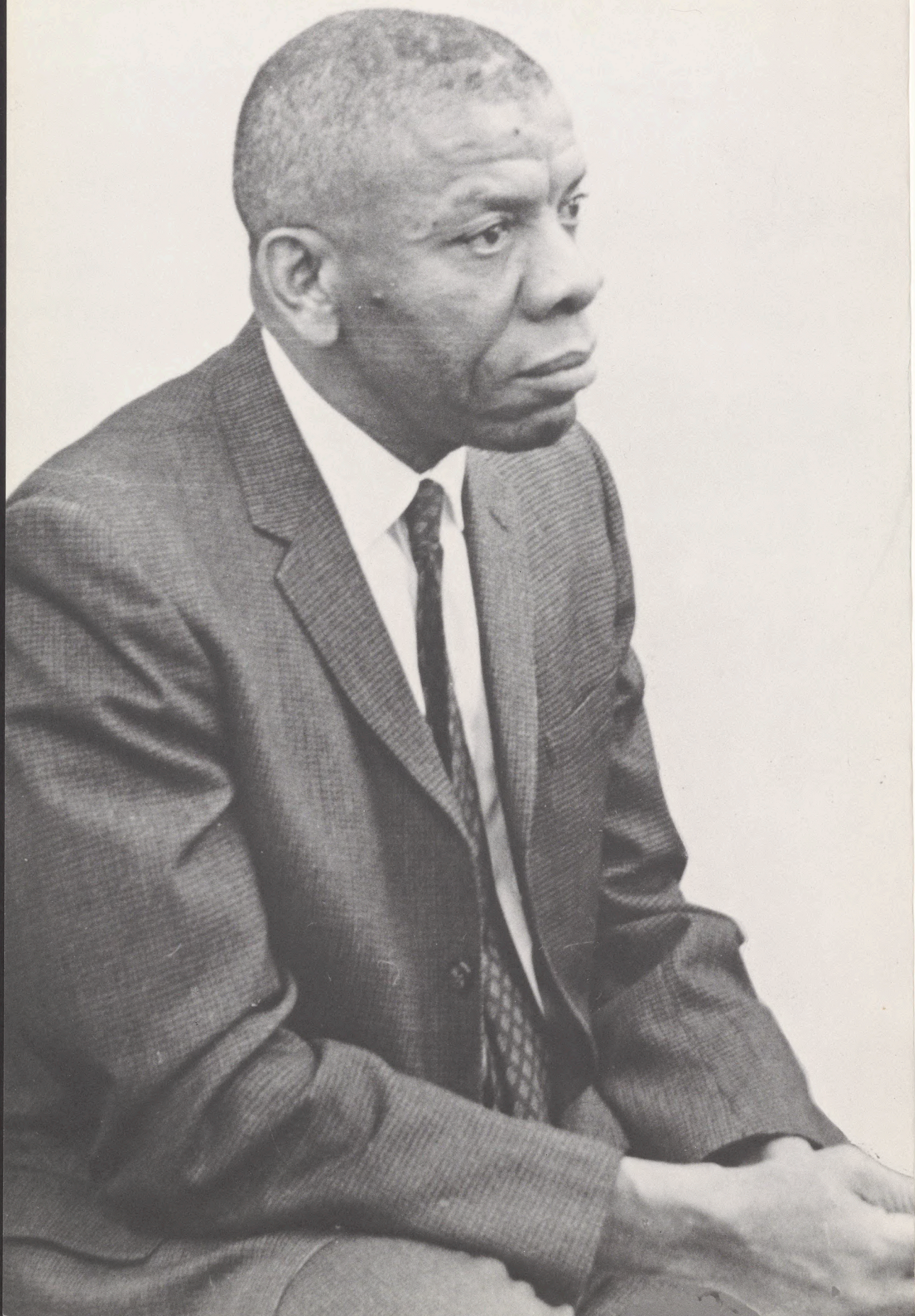






RETURN TO:  
PUBLIC RELATION  
CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART  
17th & NEW YORK AVE., N. W.  
WASHINGTON, D. C. 20006







*The Anacostia  
Neighborhood Museum,  
Smithsonian Institution,  
in cooperation with  
The Corcoran Gallery of Art  
presents*

---

JOHN  
ROBINSON  
A RETROSPECTIVE

*June 18 Through July 30, 1976*

*at the  
Corcoran Gallery of Art*



---

COVER: *Anacostia Hills* (1944), oil, 24 x 30 inches  
Library of Congress catalogue card number 76-19138



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## PREFACE

The Corcoran Gallery of Art is privileged to honor the Washington artist John Robinson. The exhibition and catalogue are presented in association with the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum of the Smithsonian Institution. As Director of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, I am always delighted to work with my colleagues from Anacostia. One of the potential and rewarding opportunities in Washington is for increasing cooperation between its museums and galleries, which grow in ever larger numbers.

To do homage to an artist who has worked for so many years in the capital city is particularly fitting during the Bicentennial year, when the Corcoran is presenting a series of exhibitions showing the work of Washington artists. The "Washington Room" is made possible by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation, which have done so much to support the arts in the nation's capital.

John Robinson was born in Washington and has lived and worked as an artist in his home city all of his life. In a quiet and conscientious manner, he has continued to paint and draw his surroundings, his family, and his friends. His scenes of everyday life show how an artist, through his art, can use the ordinary to make statements of visual pleasure. Of particular interest is the historical content of his works, for he has recorded many scenes of a city which changes year by year. The painting *Outdoor Art Fair*, for example, depicts an exhibit sponsored by the *Times Herald* in Lafayette Square Park in 1946, thus recording and preserving an event of the past, as the street scenes and houses in his works reflect the places of yesteryears. John Robinson uses himself, his wife, family, and friends, to interpret the varying character of individuals. His portraits reflect the personality,



inner poise, and nobility of the sitter. His work is unassuming yet his conscientious approach and commitment give a quiet authority and individual consistency to his art. The art of John Robinson is that of a sincere individual who records his everyday life, allowing insight into a world which others, perhaps, may not share except through his paintings and drawings.

The exhibition and catalogue should encourage artists to pursue their own art forms and maintain their integrity as individuals. The artist should always draw upon self or personal experiences in order to create art which will give enrichment and enjoyment to others.

John Robinson has the sincerity and humility inherent in the true artist. Thanks are due to him not only for his paintings and drawings but also for his full cooperation with this modest presentation of his work. Moreover, thanks should go to all those who worked so unselfishly on the exhibition and catalogue and who have come together to honor a native artist of the city of Washington.

*Roy Slade  
Director  
Corcoran Gallery of Art  
Washington, D.C.  
April 1976*



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Since Mr. S. Dillon Ripley, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, proposed the establishment of a community museum, and the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum came into being, we have consciously sought productive and positive collateral and cooperative relationships with other cultural and educational institutions across the city of Washington, D.C. The John Robinson retrospective exhibition is but one example of the positive results that can be achieved through such a relationship.

I wish to acknowledge and publicly thank the staffs of the Corcoran Gallery of Art and the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum for their cooperative spirit and efforts in organizing and producing the exhibition and the accompanying catalogue. My gratitude goes to all others who have assisted in any way.

*John R. Kinard  
Director  
Anacostia Neighborhood  
Museum  
April 1976*



# INTRODUCTION

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John Robinson's art is an art of observation, affection, and preservation, reflecting his whole life and personality. The observer must, consciously or unconsciously, recognize the strong sense of identification which far more than realistic detail distinguishes his work from that of prevailing trends in painting.

Mr. Robinson brings back the days of traditional family life, love, and happiness. His vivid statements are crystallized with nostalgia from his early years as a young man and father. His scenes of an earlier Anacostia, with its small houses, tiny gardens, and picturesque woodlands are delightful. Such a scene is clearly depicted in his *Anacostia Hills*, painted in 1944. Even his later paintings reflect a mystical fairylike quality. The soft pastel colors take you into an unreal world. He, like other artists of his time (the late John Farrar, for example), reflected the inner city or ghetto as areas of beauty and drama. So often today artists show with stark realism the horror of poverty and strife in the inner cities, yet John Robinson has changed these blighted areas into wonderlands of nature, beauty, and color. His beautiful series of lilacs are forever fragrant to those who are privileged enough to view them.

His entire collection is autobiographical, in that it reflects his home, his family, and his neighborhood. His art is by no means racial or political; it pleads no cause. It only expresses the deep sentiments of a man who has seen beauty and compassion in many areas untouched or unnoticed by others.

In taking a retrospective look at his career as an artist, I find his works much like the man himself—quiet, peaceful, and positive in nature. Comparing him with other American artists, such



as Raphael Soyer, Romare Bearden, or Reginald Marsh, it is interesting to note that they all seem to speak of people, conditions, and environments; John Robinson however, goes a little deeper into nature without the mocking eye of the satirist.

In a year when Americans are paying homage to native talent and creativity, the John Robinson exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery of Art is a long overdue tribute to an artist who has dedicated so much of his life to recording the history of our nation's capital. Mr. Robinson's work testifies to the resilience of those men and women who worked hard during the turbulent decades of depression and war to keep this city alive. Like thousands of fellow Washingtonians, he went to work every day to guarantee the survival not only of his own family but of future generations as well. His life has not been that of the leisure-class artist, privileged to spend all of his time painting. No one can say that he was the token beneficiary of a guilt-ridden art establishment.

John Robinson gathers his strength from the day-to-day loving concern of family and friends and he repays them and us, in turn, with an art whose quality was not compromised by any relative lack of privilege.

In the late 1940s, the Barnett-Aden Gallery was one of the few professional establishments to recognize the artistic efforts of John Robinson. It gives me great pleasure, therefore, to participate in the bringing of his works to a larger Washington audience who doubtless will place him among the ranks of great American artists.

*Adolphus Ealey*  
*Director*  
*Barnett-Aden Gallery*



## COMMENTARY

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The Anacostia Neighborhood Museum takes great pride in co-sponsoring with the Corcoran Gallery of Art this one-man retrospective showing of the work of John Robinson. A rare human being—his life and his art successfully blend philosophy, humility, hard work, and a sense of the social era of which he is a part. To say that he is an Anacostian and one of the finest representatives that this community has produced is correct. At the same time, however, John Robinson is a citizen of the world. His paintings communicate his great sensitivity to home, family, and community with universal interest, and offer the viewer an interpretation of life that is aesthetically pleasing as well as wholesome and nourishing. Certainly, in the hills and dales of Anacostia, often the subject of his work, you will be shown a beauty that too frequently is forgotten as we grapple with problems and seek solutions to our daily concerns of urban blight and the plight of our cities.

In retrospect our vision often becomes clearer, and so it is with this man whose works collectively create a statement of life, love, family, and community. Not content to be a passive observer, John Robinson has chosen to be a participant with keen vision. Carefully selecting tints and hues, he has used his creative talents to document the growth and development of his family and his community. He makes no pretentious statement but records life as it really is.

Born in Georgetown on "Holy Hill" near Georgetown University, John Robinson began to paint at the age of twelve. Moving to Anacostia while a young man in his early twenties, John Robinson chose to remain in our community. Here he married, worked, and raised a family. Through his art he captured the dignity and aspiration of the simple folk and their neighborhoods. This collection represents nearly thirty-six years of belief—belief in self, in family, and in community. Robinson's



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paintings have a magic quality that rekindles our spirits and renews our hopes and dreams.

This exhibition should serve as an inspiration to Anacostians of all ages. People everywhere who feel trapped, limited, or stifled are to be encouraged by the presence of a John Robinson in their midst. For he has demonstrated that man can live in harmony with his environment; that he need not despair and be without hope or purpose.

The will to survive and to live a meaningful and fruitful life can alter the chain of events. Indeed, John Robinson's life has not been without the struggle for personal dignity and daily survival, with its attendant heartaches, and pain. Consciously and courageously he chose to use adversity as a steppingstone to build for himself, his wife, and seven children a useful and productive life.

In this Bicentennial Year, we applaud the John Robinsons of this nation and this world for helping us to see the true beauty of life and for helping us to realize that in each of us lies the potential for a brighter future.

*John R. Kinard*  
*Director*  
*Anacostia Neighborhood Museum*  
*Smithsonian Institution*  
*April 19, 1976*

# AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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I was born February 18, 1912, in Georgetown near 37th Street and Prospect Avenue in the area called "Holy Hill." Attending Montgomery Elementary and Francis Junior High Schools, I later quit to help support my family.

My mother died when I was eight and my father left us (five children, ages three through ten) a few years later. Our grandmother Anna Barton and her husband Ignatius Barton undertook the raising of the children. Mr. Barton, a veteran of the Spanish-American War, was a retired sergeant, U.S. Army, who served with the Ninth and Tenth cavalries. After his retirement, he worked as a night watchman at the Key Bridge Garage in Georgetown on Banks Street.

When I was twelve, I worked with my grandfather in the garage—sweeping the floor and dusting cars. After finishing my work, I would paint. When I quit school, I did odd jobs during the day, and caddied at Congressional Country Club and Burning Tree. At night I still worked in the garage. There, a chauffeur of one of the patrons saw some of my pictures and became interested. His sister, Mrs. Elizabeth Thompson, employed at the Tax Refund Office at the District Building, knew Professor James V. Herring, the head of Howard University's Art Department. Through her efforts and the kindness of Professor Herring, I was allowed to study art under the direction of Professor James A. Porter. I must say that what I learned at Howard under Professors Herring and Porter was the basis of my efforts in art. Because of uncertainties in the way I lived, I did not stay at the university as long as I would have liked. However, I continued to paint whenever and wherever I could, painting everything from church murals to door decorations.

In 1929 my grandparents moved to a lot they owned in Anacostia to the area known as Garfield



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(in far southeast Washington, D.C.), where I still live. It is here that I began to paint in earnest. Through the efforts of Mrs. Hortense Washington (who later became my mother-in-law) and the late Reverend Claget Ward, pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church, I was able to paint my first church mural, *Christ at Gethsemane*, in the old church. Since then, I have painted religious scenes in quite a few churches in the Washington area. Some, destroyed during the urban renewal project of the 1950s, were in churches in the southwest section of the District.

Married in 1934 to a wonderful woman, Gladys, who bore seven lovely children, I continued to work and paint. We have been very happy. Not all of our blessings have been in personal accomplishments, but sometimes in the happiness of those we love. During the early years of our marriage, I worked at several different jobs. In the beginning, I was with the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). Camped at Lynchburg, Virginia, I continued to paint. It was there that I learned to play the guitar from the old blues masters. From the CCC camp I became a laborer at the Navy Yard. Eventually, I found a job at St. Elizabeth's Hospital and worked there as a kitchen helper, cook, and supervisory cook for 34 years, until my retirement in 1970. There I learned the discipline of work and the loyalties and friendships of co-workers; many of whom purchased my pictures.

During the 1940s and the years of the Outdoor Art Fairs sponsored by the *Times Herald* (later merged with the *Washington Post*), I began to exhibit at Lafayette and Franklin Parks. They were lovely days. Enjoyed, I am sure, by all. In the park I did minute sketches of people in charcoal for thirty-five cents each. At one time I had it down to seven minutes. At those exhibits I sold many paintings and met many artists; some of whom became friends. Among them were artists like Pietro

---

Lazzari, Jack Perlmutter, and Jacob Kainen, who got me into shows at the Corcoran Gallery of Art long before blacks were welcomed there.

Through these associations I met people from Capitol Photo Studios with shops on 7th Street, Northwest, and H Street, Northeast. I began to paint backgrounds for them using the medium of tempera, and covering a 6 x 8 canvas with a mixture of black and white paints, water, and glue. This extra work was a great help in raising a large family during the Depression and war years.

To keep busy has been my joy—painting pictures of landscapes around my neighborhood, creating props for church plays, or doing almost anything that needs to be done on our old house, like putting on a new roof, ceiling, floor, a coat of paint, cement work, carpentry, or anything interesting.

I cannot, I feel, have any regrets about my accomplishments. What comes from art will just come. I don't feel any need to strive.

*John N. Robinson*



## EXHIBITIONS

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*Atlanta University*

*Howard University*

*St. Elizabeth's Hospital*

*Washington Water Color Club, 52nd Annual Exhibition, Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution*

*Times Herald Outdoor Art Fair*

*Barnett-Aden Gallery*

*Artist's Guild of Washington, 11th Annual Exhibition, Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution*

*"16 Washington Artists," Anacostia Neighborhood Museum, Smithsonian Institution*

*Xavier University*

*"Barnett-Aden Collection," Anacostia Neighborhood Museum, Smithsonian Institution*

*Corcoran Gallery of Art*

*Emmanuel Baptist Church, one-man show*

*Oxon Hill Library, one-man show*

## COLLECTIONS

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*Howard University*

*Barnett-Aden Collection*

*Atlanta University*

*Tenth Street Baptist Church*

*Young's Memorial Church of Christ Holiness, Inc.*

*Rehobeth Baptist Church*

*Mt. Airy Baptist Church*

*Afro-American Historical and Cultural Museum*



## PUBLICATIONS

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*Anacostia Neighborhood Museum. 16 Washington Artists. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1968.*

*Anacostia Neighborhood Museum. The Barnett-Aden Collection. Washington, D.C.:  
Smithsonian Institution Press, 1974.*

*Cederholm, Theresa Dickason, editor. Afro-American Artist. Boston: Trustees of the Boston Public Library, 1973.*

*Dover, Cedric. American Negro Art. Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1960.*

*Ebony, editors of. The Negro Handbook. Chicago: Johnson Publication Co., 1966.*

*The High Museum of Art. Highlights from the Atlanta University Collection of Afro-American Art.*

*Pierre-Noel, Lois Jones. "American Negro Art in Progress," Negro History Bulletin. October 1967.*

*Walker, Roslyn. A Resource Guide to the Visual Arts of Afro-Americans. South Bend:  
South Bend Community School Corporation, 1971.*

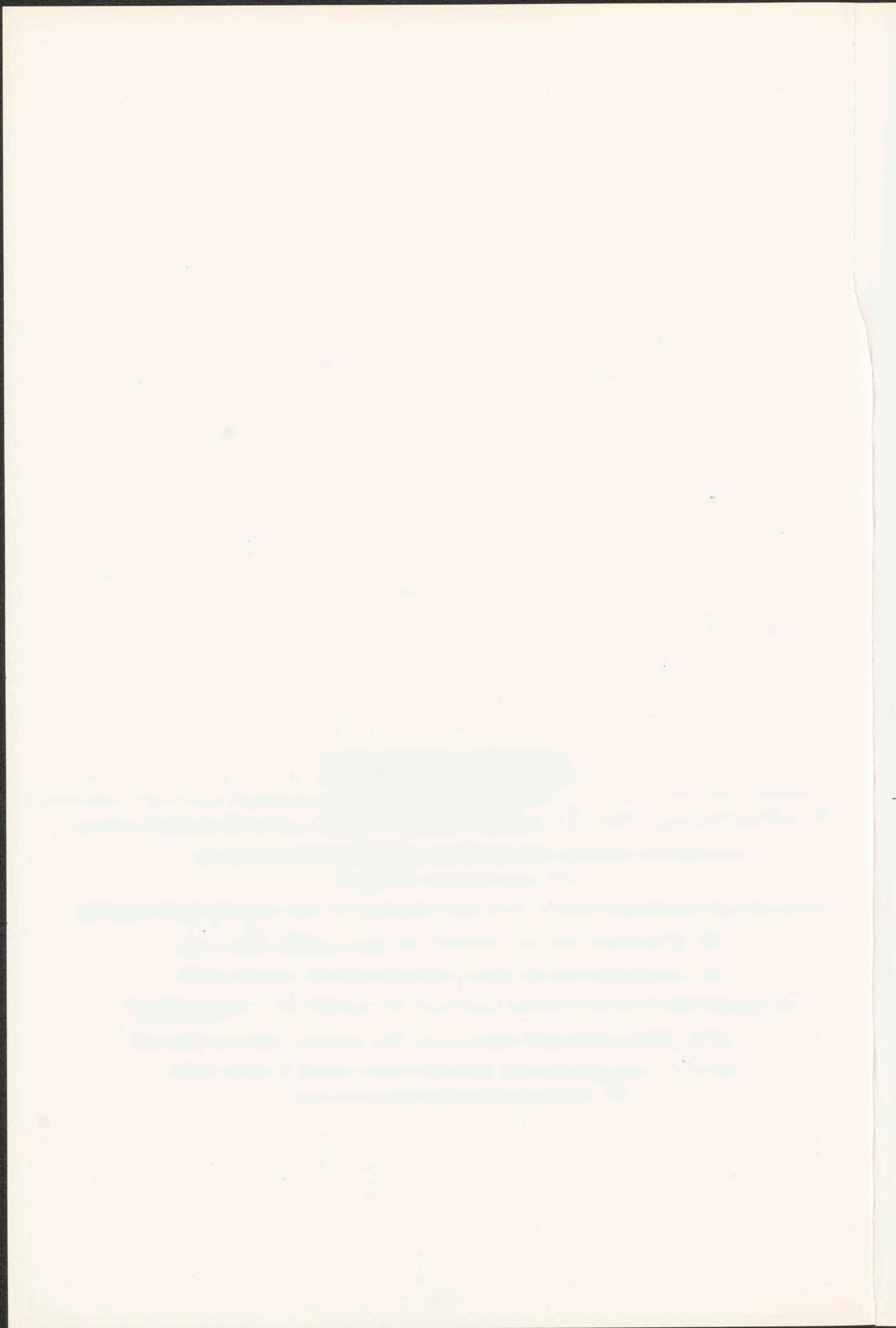
## MEMBERSHIPS

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*D.C. Commission on the Arts*

*East Bank Artists Association*





# CATALOGUE OF THE EXHIBITION

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*Works of art are arranged  
in chronological order by the year in which  
they were executed.*

*Sizes are in inches; height precedes width.*



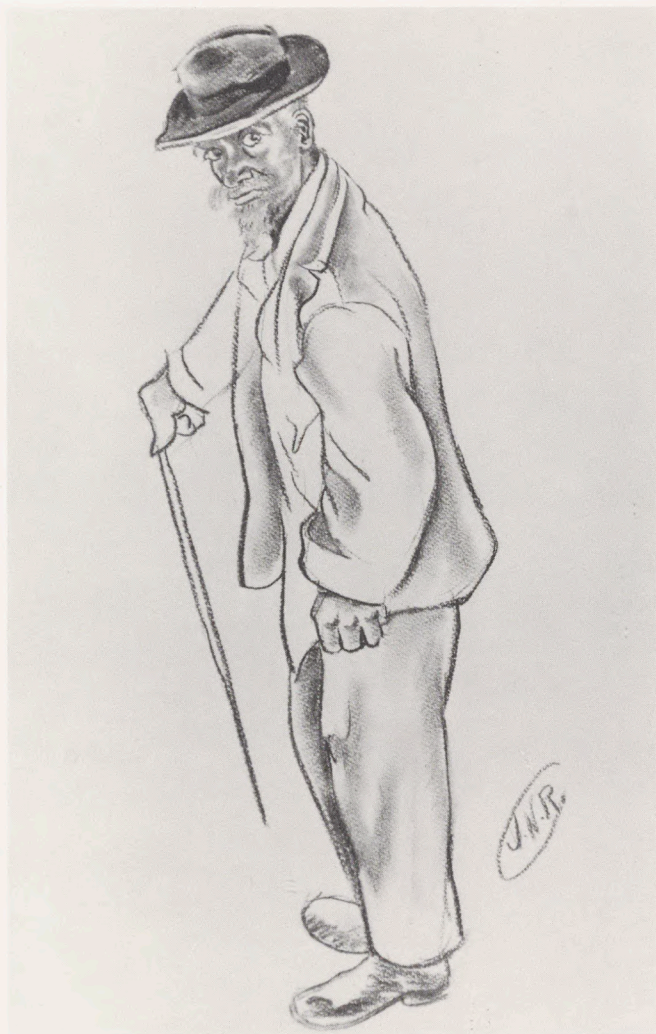


SARGE  
Oil, 1938  
24 x 18

Collection of the artist

*"... a man who tried to hide his kindness with a gruff exterior; my grandfather posed for the portrait with all his medals."*





MR. QUIGLEY  
Charcoal, 1939  
24 x 18  
Collection of the artist

*"A friend of my grandfather's who also lived in the Garfield  
section of Washington; an old Christian gentleman  
who worked hard and went to church."*





MAUD JONES

Oil, 1940

24 x 20

Collection of the artist

*"... she sold newspapers on New York Avenue and came up around  
the Outdoor Art Fairs; she wanted to have  
herself painted with the Bible but disappeared  
before I completed the portrait."*





MY GRANDMOTHER

Oil, 1940

20 x 16

Loaned by Mrs. Emma Madden

*"I'm very proud of this painting, she was such a warm, lovely person.*

*In order to help support us,  
she took in laundry and we would deliver the  
clothes to the homes in Georgetown."*

PEACHES

Pastel, 1941

27 x 21

Loaned by Mrs. Roberta Jennings





SELF PORTRAIT

Pastel, 1941

20 x 16

Collection of the artist

*"The artist as a much younger man; it's taken from  
the one in the Barnett-Aden collection."*

GLADYS

Pastel, 1941

28 x 22

Collection of the artist





---

PETE  
Pastel, 1942  
28 x 22  
Collection of the artist

*"... my youngest son, his personality hasn't changed,  
he's still happy-go-lucky."*

CAUGHT NAPPING  
Charcoal, 1942  
18 x 24  
Collection of the artist





RAYNOLDS PLACE 1942

Oil, 1942

16 x 20

Collection of the artist

*"... my grandparents' and brother-in-law's homes; originally it was titled After Glow but I could only get that effect in certain light; it was one of the most difficult paintings. I'm never completely satisfied with a landscape."*

FALL SCENE NO. 1

Pastel, 1942

24 x 18

Collection of the artist





PETE AND BLANCHE

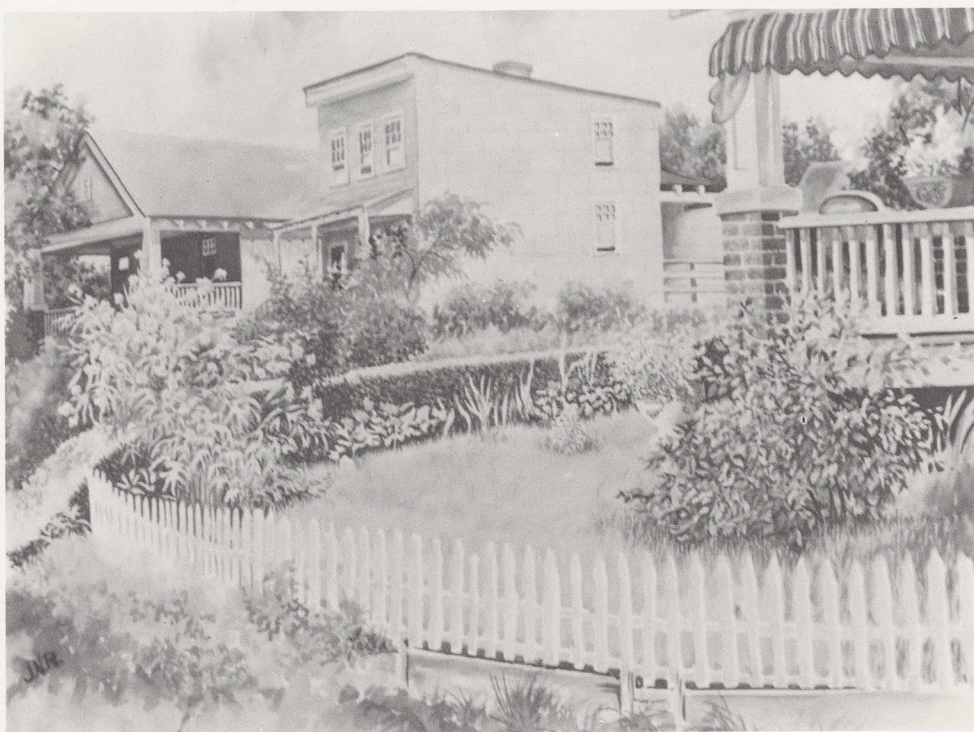
Pastel, 1942

30 x 24

Collection of the artist

*"My son and daughter; my favorite painting. People ask how  
I got the children to sit still, I tell stories  
and read to them. All our six children never got into  
any trouble or needed financial assistance."*





OLD HOUSES  
Watercolor, 1943  
18 x 24  
Collection of the artist

*"One of them was owned by my mother-in-law,  
a wonderful woman. One regret I have is that I did the watercolors  
when I couldn't afford good paints."*





A BLACK MAN AT THE WHITE HOUSE

Oil, 1943

16 x 20

Collection of the artist

*"... this was done for a mural competition at the Recorder of Deeds office; it depicts Senator Pomeroy introducing Frederick Douglass to President Lincoln."*





ANACOSTIA HILLS

Oil, 1944

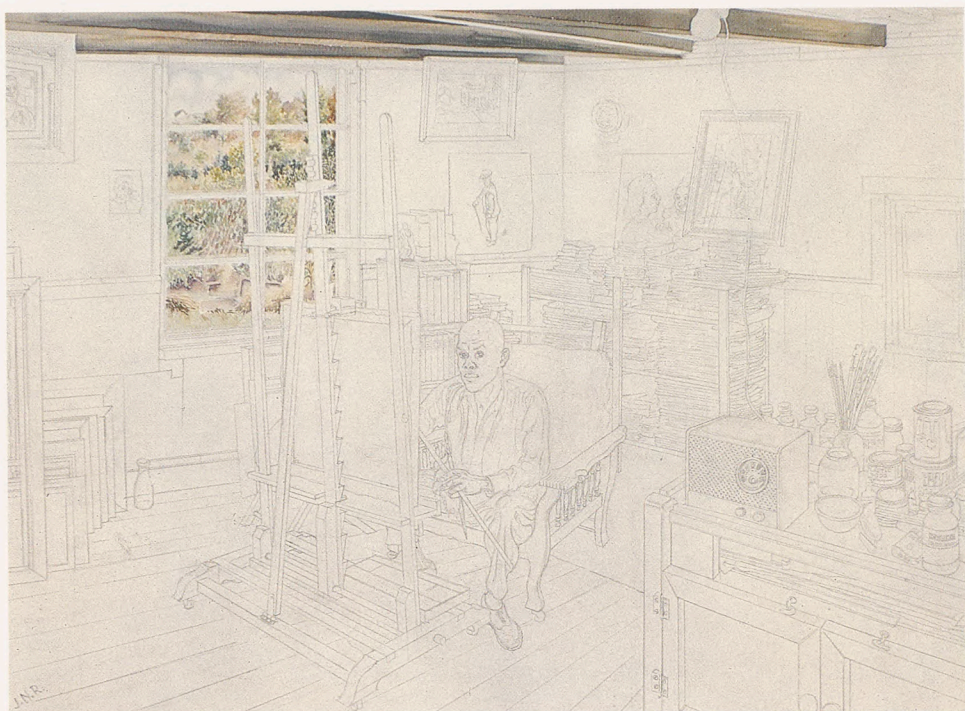
24 x 30

Loaned anonymously

*"My most vivid memory was the sisters coming to chase  
the kids away from the churchgrounds [Our Lady of Perpetual Help]  
where I painted it.*

*"The critics said what they admired most was the spaciousness."*

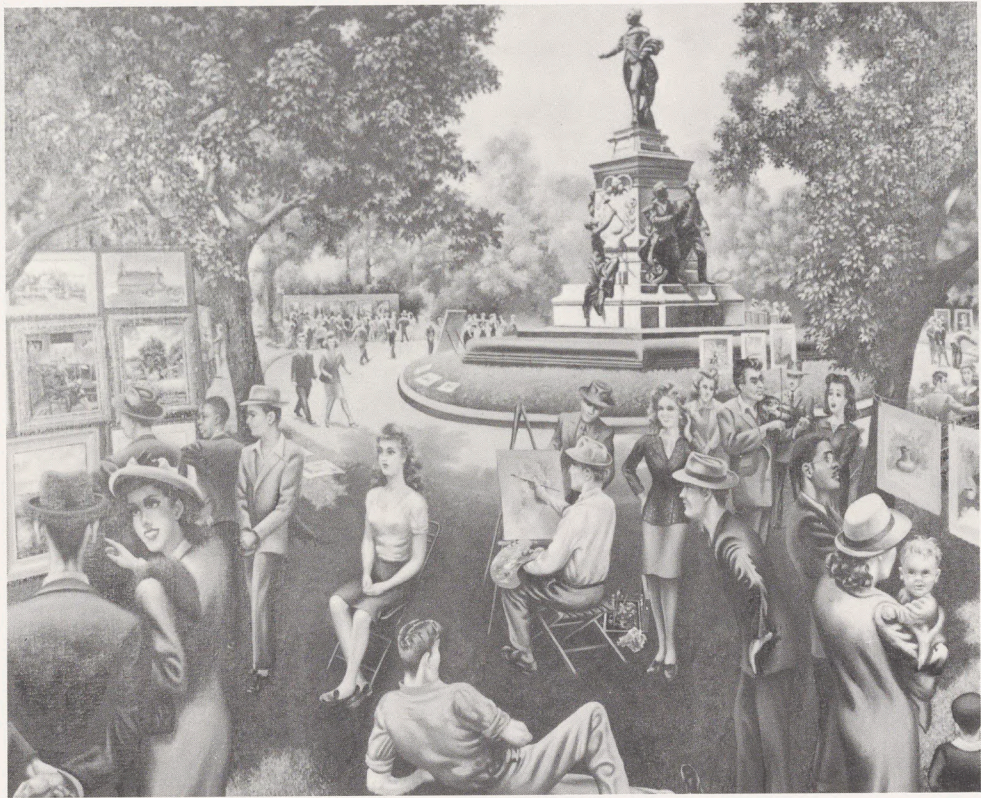




IN THE STUDIO  
Pencil and Watercolor, 1945  
22 x 28  
Collection of the artist

*"It was going to be a watercolor but I never finished it, I just  
had too much to do and I liked it as a pencil sketch."*





OUTDOOR ART FAIR

Oil, 1946

40 x 60

Collection of the artist

*"The fairs were held every summer in June and I won seven prizes over the years; the man in the painting was Louis Haynes who did all the oil portraits at the fairs; he was about 50 percent of the show."*





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LIFE'S SUNSET  
Watercolor, 1947  
24 x 18  
Collection of the artist

*"... an old man going down the road to oblivion ..."*





---

WINTER SCENE

Pastel, 1947

24 x 18

Collection of the artist

*"... another one of my favorites; an early morning  
scene near my house."*

THE OLD STUDIO  
Watercolor, 1947  
16 x 20  
Collection of the artist

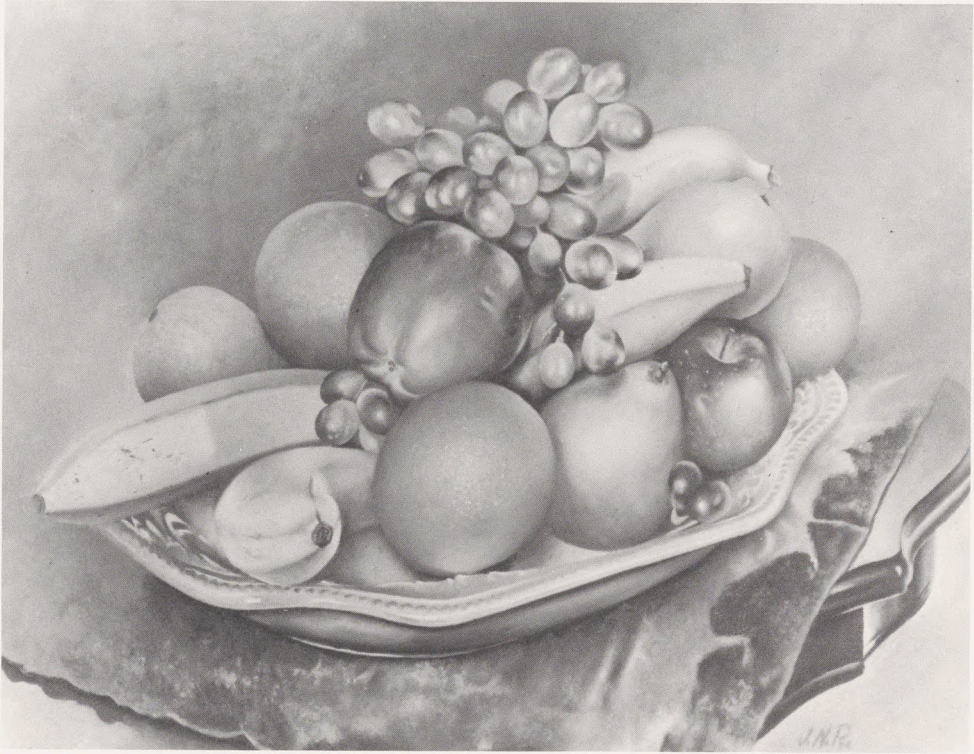
LANDSCAPE  
Oil, 1948  
20 x 28  
Loaned by Mrs. Martha Jenkins

IN THE STUDIO  
Watercolor, 1949  
24 x 18  
Collection of the artist

RECLINING FIGURE  
Oil, 1952  
18 x 24  
Collection of the artist

THE BUILDERS  
Watercolor, 1953  
16 x 20  
Collection of the artist





STILL LIFE, FRUIT

Oil, 1956

16 x 20

Loaned by Mrs. Martha Jenkins

*"I painted this for my wife but Mrs. Jenkins wanted it and so my wife reluctantly parted with it. Mrs. Jenkins was my supervisor at St. Elizabeth's, a kind and good woman."*





LANDSCAPE

Oil, 1958

20 x 28

Loaned by Mr. and Mrs. Elliot T. Robinson

*"My studio, I helped to build it and built the shed behind it myself;  
I like it for the atmosphere, the haze in it."*

CHRISTMAS DOOR

Oil, 1958

24 x 30

Collection of the artist





AUTUMN LANDSCAPE

Watercolor, 1958

24 x 18

Loaned by Mrs. Roberta Jennings

*"... the change of seasons has a special appeal. The light fascinates me, I key on the light."*

LILACS

Oil, 1959

18 x 24

Loaned by Mr. and Mrs. John Robinson, Jr.

THE EASTER BONNET

Oil, 1963

24 x 20

Loaned by Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin Harris

DAFFODILS

Watercolor, 1963

14 x 11

Collection of the artist





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GLADYS

Watercolor, 1967

24 x 18

Collection of the artist

*"... my best watercolor, at least my most successful and  
her favorite; it has life and vitality."*



RAYNOLDS PLACE

Watercolor, 1970

22 x 28

Collection of the artist

*"I'd like to paint the scene now and call it  
Where the Grapes of Wrath are Stored; it's an  
interesting part of the city."*





LILACS  
Oil, 1970  
20 x 24  
Collection of the artist

*"I like the successful use of light; the source was a candle  
outside the scene. Our house is surrounded by lilacs and I got  
in the habit of painting them every year since  
we moved in over forty years ago."*





BACKYARD SCENE

Oil, 1971

18 x 24

Collection of the artist

*"The rear of my house when we had a dog;  
I like the atmosphere and the light."*



LILACS, NO. 2

Watercolor, 1975

28 x 22

Collection of the artist

NO PARKING

Oil, 1975

30 x 24

Collection of the artist

MAGNOLIA TREE

Watercolor, 1975

24 x 18

Collection of the artist

# INDEX OF TITLES

*Titles with an asterisk (\*) are illustrated in black and white; two asterisks (\*\*) denote illustrations in color.*

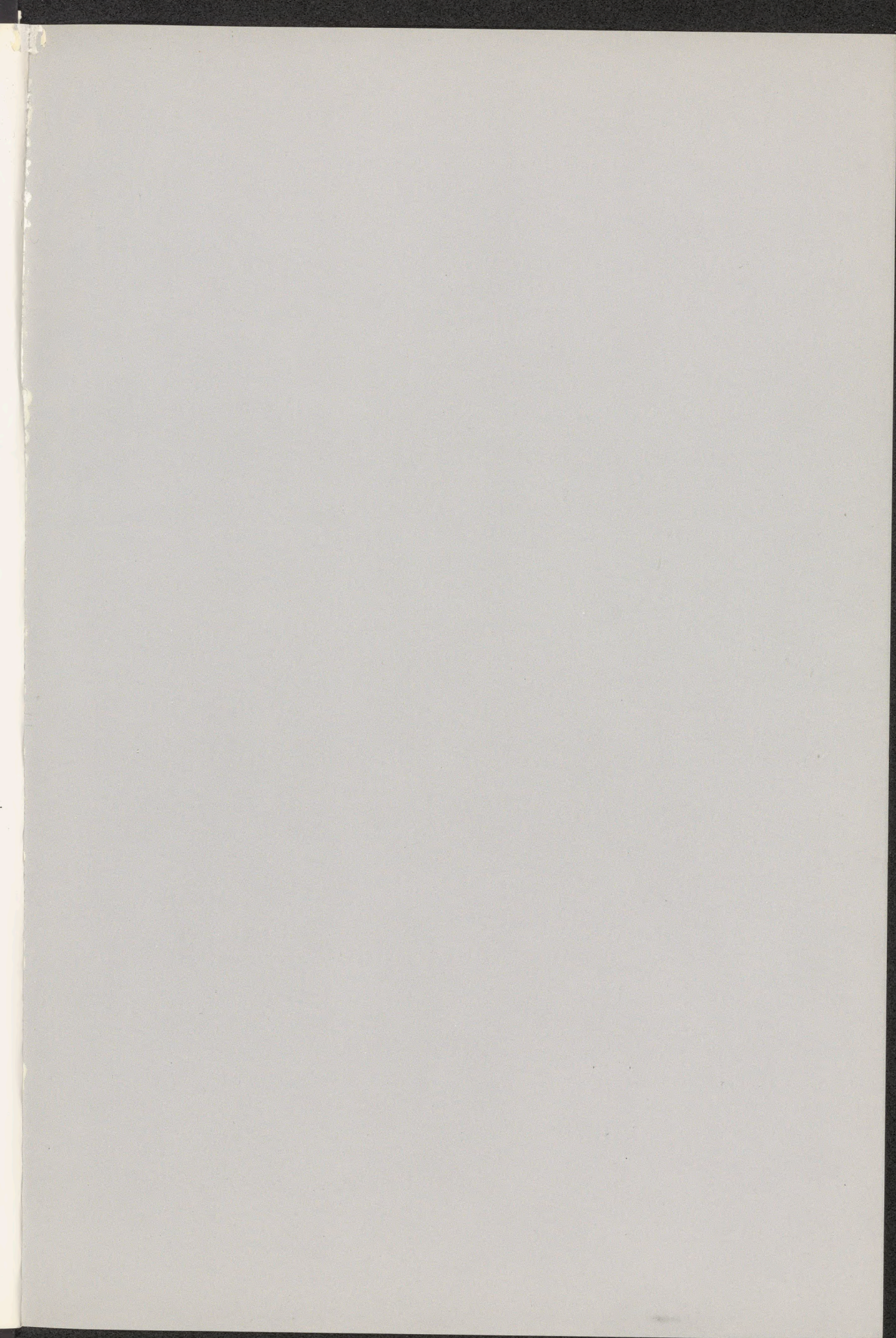
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